

Critical Conditions

WILLIAM E. VAN TASSEL, PH.D.
MANAGER, DRIVER TRAINING OPERATIONS
AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION
HEATHROW, FLA.

Driving is especially risky during poor weather. Conditions such as rain, snow and ice reduce traction and, combined with driver errors, can create a recipe for injury or death. The fact that many of these accidents are preventable means we can identify the risks and do something about them. Here are some tips to keep safe on wintry roads:

Brakes

If your vehicle has an antilock braking system, test it before you need it and become familiar with its operation. Pick a rainy day and find a safe, open area where you can practice hitting your brakes and engaging the ABS. If you've never done it before, you might be surprised at the pedal vibration and the sounds you'll hear, but these events are normal. The key is to keep firm pressure on the brake pedal and steer where you want to go. Your ABS brakes will keep you from sliding, allowing you to maneuver during an emergency. If you're not sure your vehicle has ABS, watch the dash lights when you start the engine. If you have ABS, an ABS light will illuminate briefly.

Tires

Tires are vital to your safety and are the key to how well your car steers, brakes and accelerates. Check to see if the tread is deep enough to divert water from beneath the tires and enhance traction in snowy or icy conditions. A simple test is to stick a penny in the tread. If you can see the top of Lincoln's head, it's time for new tires. Also check the air pressure in each tire and make sure it's set to the manufacturer's recommended pressure. Tire inflation affects the speed at which your vehicle will hydroplane. Underinflated tires will increase your traction at speeds under 50 mph, but above that speed they're more likely to hydroplane. Checking tire pressure at least once a month is one of the most important steps you can take to ensure your family's safety.

Seat belts

Occupant protection is the simplest, most effective tool for reducing injuries during a crash. For adults, this means using the vehicle's seat belts. For children, this means using the appropriate child safety seat. Because inspections have found almost 90 percent of these seats are installed improperly, have your child's seat checked by a certified safety seat technician. Your child's school should be able to put you in touch with these specialists.

Controlled braking

Brake earlier than you would in good conditions and apply brake pedal pressure very smoothly. The vehicle's weight transfers toward the front as you brake, reducing the weight over the rear tires and increasing the possibility of skidding and oversteering. Don't use your entire leg to depress the brake pedal; instead,



set your heel on the floorboard and use your ankle as a pivot point, gently pushing with the ball of your foot. This stance will increase your control as you brake.

Distractions

Free yourself from distractions. When the weather turns bad, you need to concentrate even more on controlling your vehicle. Turn the radio down or off and turn off your cell phone's ringer. Take a deep breath, relax your hold on the steering wheel and focus on maintaining control and avoiding less careful drivers. While winter weather poses additional risks to drivers, those risks don't have to result in accidents. Make sure you and every driver in your family practices using ABS until it's instinctive. It's far better to steer clear of trouble than to slide into it!

---FYI If your rear wheels begin to skid, take the following steps:

- Continue looking in the direction you want to travel. Your hands and feet will automatically do what's necessary to steer you in that direction.
- Gently ease up on the brakes and allow some of the vehicle's weight to transfer toward the rear where it's needed.
- Resist panic braking every time there's a problem—you'll only increase your chances of losing control of the vehicle.